

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Jean Brandl, Manny Atwal

FROM: Mary McKinley, Executive Director, Heartland Democracy

DATE: January 24, 2015

RE: Update on project

Following the last continuance of the hearing for Mr. Abdullahi Yusuf, we continued our work creating a very specific and concrete program and schedule into which Mr. Yusuf would integrate upon his release. Because we are developing this project in a somewhat different order than we normally operate—demand first, highly specific and unique participant needs up front, then new partners and additional research, and funding last--and on a much more accelerated schedule, the process has been new for us. However, we feel we are making progress on your concerns and those of the Court and government.

We agree with you and the public statements of the US Attorney that we need to change the discussion on this issue. We are not naïve about the threats of terrorism. In fact, both Tom Vellenga, the founder of Heartland Democracy, and I have significant experience on the security aspects of this case. Tom worked for years in Washington, in the Senate and then at USAID, and then as national security advisor to then Chief of Staff Leon Panetta in the Clinton White House. I returned to Minnesota five years ago after working first overseas for the Open Society Institute, and then in Washington for the Aspen Institute, on their foreign and defense policy roundtables. I most recently had worked as associate director of the Markle Foundation on National Security, launched after 9/11. My director there went on to lead the 9/11 Commission.

We understand that there are real and violent elements involved in this challenge. Here in Minnesota, the good news is that the Somali-Americans we are all talking about and working with are also Minnesotans, people who have lived here and invested in our communities for decades. It is in Minnesota's vital interest to help the young men and women of this community discover the power to improve their lives here in the United States, through productive and peaceful means, rather than through extremist ideologies that lead, in most cases, to their own certain death. When such young Somali-Americans learn their place in the fabric of American life, see their own place in American systems and institutions, and empower themselves within their own communities, they will not only help themselves – they will improve our national and homeland security.

We are all familiar with other life-threatening options chosen by disaffected young people of all communities who believe that their lives are without value: gang activity,

criminal behavior, violence, firearm use, dropping out of school, severing ties with family, drug use, and trafficking. We would like to use the strength of Empowering U and all of its assets to change the discussion around these Somali young people. We also know that while this case is unique, given the circumstances, we recognize that if Mr. Yusuf is allowed pre-trial release, he will be as responsible for his behavior and choices as anyone charged and monitored by Probation Officers and other authorities. We believe we can participate as one key aspect of that “authority”.

After meeting with Mr. Yusuf and talking with him about his situation, his life, his desires, his interests, we feel the components of what we are building would meet both his needs and those of law enforcement:

- We are working to re-enroll Mr. Yusuf in community college, most likely Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), to give him an academic and social “home” where he can attend class, study, engage with peers, and participate in our program, both within a group setting and receiving one-on-one mentoring and counseling. MCTC also has a relationship with one of Mr. Yusuf’s high schools, Heritage, and has a large Somali-American student body. Mr. Yusuf plans to focus on his general education courses as well as paramedic coursework he enjoyed at Inver Hills.
- We think it will be most useful for Mr. Yusuf to be among his peers to explore issues of life, school, culture, family, and the future. He will also participate in specific, more intense programs designed for his particular situation. We are recruiting other Somali-American students for the group portions of this program because of the unique cultural issues of Somali-Americans, but not necessarily those labeled as “at-risk” other than the fact that they are perhaps first generation college-goers (though many are not).
- When we described to Mr. Yusuf the parallel “Empower Parents” group we intend to launch, to assist parents of young Somali-Americans with the specific challenges they face, Mr. Yusuf said, “It’s like we young people live in two different worlds. We go to school, we speak English, we are American. And then we go home and when we walk in the door it’s like walking into a different country. It’s like Somalia, and our parents are very worried about what’s going on there.” We think an adult curriculum will be key -- including parenting, mental health, safety and education issues, addressing the “generation gap”, as well as our standard civics and civic engagement material.
- To begin Mr. Yusuf’s re-engagement with community, we are pursuing a partnership that will help him pursue two of his expressed interests simultaneously: basketball and teaching. When we asked Mr. Yusuf if he would like to help coach a junior basketball team, his face lit up. We are seeking an appropriate mentor at the YMCA to partner with us on this aspect of the program.
- We explained to Mr. Yusuf that one of the sustaining elements of our program is that we “teach the teachers”. We talked about his becoming a co-coach after

- completing several months of the program himself. He could then help lead sessions of other young people, developing leadership skills, teaching elements of the curriculum to his peers, leading discussions, speaking to his experience, and serving as a mentor to others in the future.
- We are working with and training a number of mentors, coaches and teachers -- people who have worked with at-risk young people, both within the Somali-American community and in other settings, including juvenile justice. We are also working with people well-versed in the kind of "turn-around curriculum" we use. Of course, we are facing a number of challenges, including scheduling issues and other unknowns, our current lack of significant funds for the program we are designing, as well as the new and emerging curriculum and methodology we are weaving into our existing program data. We have connected with several skilled and enthusiastic individuals who are highly motivated to address the issues we've highlighted and who look forward to working with these young members of our community.
  - On that note, we are connecting and re-connecting with local, national and international leaders on these topics, to support us in developing this new aspect of our work, including: Ms. Zainab Hassan, a good friend to Heartland, formerly of the Minneapolis Foundation, who is now rebuilding the National Library in Somalia; Claude Maddox, who coached our program at 180 Degrees in St. Paul for over 2 years; Maajid Nawaz, noted author and founder of Quillium, a counter-extremism think tank in the UK; and Salam Al Marayati, of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. These leaders and experts, along with others we are reaching out to, will work with our existing local team to augment and adapt our current program and curriculum to meet the needs of Mr. Yusuf and other young Somali-Americans in Minnesota. As with any educational program, this will continue to be a work in progress.
  - We are also working diligently and daily to reach out to our most supportive donors and friends at local foundations, but the funding component remains a puzzle, at least for the time being. Both individual donors and foundations (our typical funding sources) are reluctant to fund something that is being so quickly adapted for a specific participant/small group, and, as we all know, most public and private funding takes months to secure. There is interest, to be sure, and our hope is that we could establish a funding partnership of public, foundation, and individual donors that would support the broader program going forward, reaching more young people beyond Mr. Yusuf's immediate cohort at Inver Hills. We could launch a small portion of this program with reserve funds, but additional funding would need to be secured rapidly to continue the program long-term and ensure its expansion to other communities.

Make no mistake: we realize this would be an experiment, a pre-trial release program unlike any other, especially in dealing with the ISIL threat and the counter-terrorism efforts that are the focus of the US government, the FBI, the US Attorney, law enforcement, and the White House. However, we hope with you we might succeed in a

launch of the program for young Somali-Americans, into which Mr. Yusuf (and others?) could integrate in the future.

We are now in the process of securing the following: a concrete series of programs, with dates, locations, coaches, coach trainees, evaluators, and a new curriculum developed for this particular population. We would all like to know what a “day in the life of Mr. Yusuf” would look like. While we can not, as mentioned above, be his only destination during his release, we can provide some structure and much-needed mentorship, which might lead to his gradual re-connection with civil society in his Somali-American community and, at the very least, a gradual rejection of whatever violent ideology he allegedly was seeking.

Regardless of the outcome of Mr. Yusuf’s case, we are committed to pursuing this project with a larger set of young Somali-Americans. This community has been the victim of benign neglect, and we know the consequences: youth involved in violence, gangs, drug use and trafficking, high rates of poverty, extremely high unemployment rates, and now terrorism.

Beyond the specifics of this case there lies a wider issue for our organization: how do we commit to our work within the Somali community on a broader level, creating opportunities for vast numbers of young people to participate in a program that will lead to deeper understanding of their own rights and responsibilities, their own power to affect change, their own community, and its institutions?